



35 of 167 DOCUMENTS

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THE BALTIMORE SUN

August 4, 1999, Wednesday ,FINAL

SECTION: LOCAL ,4B

LENGTH: 738 words

HEADLINE: Sen. Conway backs O'Malley for mayor, the first black legislator to endorse him; Other lawmakers expected to announce support today

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SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

City Councilman Martin O'Malley -- the leading white candidate in Baltimore's mayoral contest -- is picking up biracial support among state legislators in his bid to lead a city that is predominantly African-American.

State Sen. Joan Carter Conway became the first African-American elected official to endorse O'Malley yesterday, saying it is most important that voters consider who the best mayor would be rather than focus on the race of the 27 candidates who are running.

"It is not about black and white," Conway, who represents the 43rd District, said during a public endorsement in a vacant lot across from Conway's district legislative office in Northeast Baltimore. "It's about less crime. It's about equity for all."

O'Malley welcomed the support from his state senator and former 3rd District City Council colleague. "I just want to say how incredibly humbled I am to have such friends," O'Malley said in a short speech.

Conway's endorsement comes as other state political leaders -- including African-American legislators Del. Howard P. "Pete" Rawlings and Del. Kenneth C. Montague Jr. -- are lining up for O'Malley.

Rawlings and Montague will join Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman and Del. Samuel I. "Sandy" Rosenberg in endorsing O'Malley tomorrow in front of City Hall.

Even as support continues to grow for O'Malley's candidacy, it was clear yesterday that political leaders are sensitive about backing a white candidate in a city that is more than 60 percent African-American -- especially after the last two mayors have been black.

Hoffman said some political leaders thought about not giving endorsements because several candidates have

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troubled backgrounds and because of concerns about engendering racial tension. Before she could support O'Malley, Hoffman said she wanted to know that African-American legislators also were endorsing him.

"The last thing you want to do is polarize the city," she said.

Even so, the African-American leaders who are coming out for O'Malley are facing criticism.

Conway's endorsement drew fire from Julius Henson, a consultant for Council President Lawrence A. Bell III's mayoral campaign, who attended yesterday's event. In his confrontational style, Henson referred to Conway as one of the "so-called, pseudo-Negro political leaders."

"This is a appalling," Henson said. "Senator Conway and people like her are trying to serve their interests at the expense of the citizens of Baltimore. She's pushing, trying to divide this city."

As Henson criticized Conway for her decision, other O'Malley supporters defended Conway and O'Malley.

"I'm a black man, and I'm behind O'Malley 100 percent," said Marvin Briscoe, a former president of the Hillen Road Improvement Association. "He did a lot for our community. Black politicians will hurt you, too. I'm going to take a chance with O'Malley."

Conway said she was backing O'Malley because of his record in working to improve the quality of life for all people. She mentioned his support on such issues as the fight against discrimination and against police brutality.

"If Martin O'Malley's hue was a little deeper, we wouldn't have any concerns about him," the senator said.

Conway said she also has received criticism from others who are supporting African-American candidates. She said they have told her, "You're going to be the target, just let your candidate lose."

But Conway told the crowd of about two dozen people -- including media and O'Malley supporters -- that during times she had needed Bell's support, he was not there for her. She said O'Malley always has been willing to help.

"We're going to set the record straight," Conway said. "It's sad that my personal decision will transcend into the political arena. But I will not be threatened. I will not be intimidated."

In a related development yesterday, Baltimore's largest union of health care workers threw its support behind the candidacy of O'Malley.

The president of Service Employees International Union District 1199E-DC said he would make the announcement at 4: 30 p.m. today at the local's headquarters, 611 N. Eutaw St.

"O'Malley is the candidate who will respond to the plight of health-care consumers and workers and is committed to maintaining health care's central role in the local economy," said President Robert Moore.

The union also said it would endorse Sheila Dixon for City Council president.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) Joan Carter Conway: "It is not about black and white," the senator says. "It's about less crime. It's about equity for all."

LOAD-DATE: August 5, 1999